

## THE INFLUENCE OF CONRAD'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCES ON THE MODELLING OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS IN HIS WRITING

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**Abstract:** In this article I argue that the sphere of complex and difficult relations between men and women plays an important role in Conrad's fiction, as it brings together all the existential, socio-philosophical and ethical dilemmas faced by the protagonists. Scholars who have discussed this subject include A. Gillon, E.B. Harrington, S. Jones, B. Meyer, A.M. Roberts, B. Soane and C. Watts. It would seem that there was a strong link between Conrad's traumatic experiences as a child (when his parents were unable to provide him with the emotional warmth and security which he needed), his later unsuccessful relationships with various women and the way in which he portrayed relations between the sexes in his fiction. Conrad's pessimistic outlook on life and the difficulties he had experienced in forming relationships with women would seem to have been reflected in the way in which he constructed the 'represented world' of his novels. Conrad's characters are torn between attraction to the opposite sex and a feeling of alienation resulting from an inability to achieve mutual understanding. The words "irresistible and fateful impulse" – used by Conrad in the story *Amy Foster* – not only seem to be particularly applicable to relations between men and women in Conrad's fiction, but would also seem to constitute a model according to which the author maps out the courses of their lives. The Conradian drama of relations between men and women is played out between two extremes or poles, as it were. In most cases we have an "irresistible and fateful impulse". At other times the woman is idealized, while the man is left to play the equally unconvincing role of enthralled admirer. Either way, there is an awareness of the immense obstacles which hinder mutual understanding and which result from a sense of the tragic nature of human existence – and relations between men and women in particular.

**Keywords:** relations between men and women in Conrad's novels, Conrad's male characters, Conrad's female characters, Conrad's traumatic childhood, Conrad's pessimism, ambiguous feelings, fatalism, trauma, the inability to achieve mutual understanding between the sexes.

Analysing the way in which Conrad portrayed relations between men and women in his writing, we can easily see that he was fully aware of their complex nature and meaning. Conrad scholars have begun to devote more attention to this subject, one of the first being Thomas Moser, who has argued that the theme of love is not the strongest point of Conrad's fiction:

[...] when Conrad wrote about love he became artificial, awkward and quite often garishly banal.<sup>1</sup>

Moser is also of the opinion that this unconvincing treatment of the theme of love detracted from the artistic value of Conrad's prose after 1912, when relations between men and women began to play a significant role in the novels and at times became an important thread of the plot.

Defending Conrad against the charge that he was 'losing his form' as a writer, Zdzisław Najder claims that the theme of love only plays a minor role in his fiction and that:

[...] Conrad opposed the emphasis on erotic themes in literature because he was convinced that it would overshadow more vital and serious problems.<sup>2</sup>

Conrad's main concern, Najder argues, was with:

[...] responsibility, the sense of duty, guilt, justice, freedom, honour, solidarity, anarchy, order – masculine-feminine affairs were not in the forefront.<sup>3</sup>

However, in Conrad's fiction the theme of love is inextricably bound up with the existential, philosophical and ethical dilemmas faced by the main characters. Are the serious problems of responsibility, duty, guilt, freedom and honour really so far removed from the tangled fates of Natalia Haldin and Razumov, Lena and Axel Heyst, Roderick Anthony and Flora de Barral, the dramatic conflict between Susan Bacadou and her husband and the tragic misunderstanding between Amy Foster and Yanko Gooral – to mention but a few? These thematic threads constitute a significant part of the novels in which they appear, as they are used by the author to portray important phenomena relating to Society, manners and culture. Although it is true that Conrad either makes no reference to the erotic experiences of his characters or merely acknowledges them with stylistically flawed descriptions, the sphere of complex and difficult relations between men and women is by no means a marginal feature of his writing. This is shown by the penetrating analyses of ... Ellen B. Harrington,<sup>4</sup> who has searched for links between the way in which Winnie Verloc is portrayed and the theory of Cesare Lombroso; Bev Soane,<sup>5</sup> who has examined relations between men and women using the concepts of colonized and colonizer; also Andrew M. Roberts,<sup>6</sup> who has written about the consequences of the social exclusion of Conrad's women.

<sup>1</sup> Th. Moser. *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline*. Cambridge Mass., 1957. Quoted by: Z. Najder. *Joseph Conrad. A Chronicle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 362.

<sup>2</sup> Z. Najder. *Joseph Conrad. A Chronicle*, ed. cit., p. 362.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>4</sup> E.B. Harrington. "The Female Offender, the New Woman and Winnie Verloc in *The Secret Agent*" [In:] *The Secret Agent: Centennial Essays*. Ed. A.H. Simmons and J.H. Stape. Amsterdam–New York: Rodopi, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Bev Soane. "The Colony and the Heart of Empire: Domestic Space in *The Secret Agent*". *The Conradian* 2005, Vol. 30, № 1,

<sup>6</sup> A.M. Roberts. "'What Else Could I Tell Him?' Confessing to Men and Lying to Women in Conrad's Fiction". *L'Époque Conradianne* 1993, Vol. 19.

A study by Susan Jones entitled *Conrad and Women* examines the issue from the perspective of Edwardian movements for the emancipation of women.<sup>7</sup> Even the condensed typology of Conradian characters made by Cedric Watts<sup>8</sup> highlights the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of their mutual relations. At the same time, we must note that terms such as 'eroticism', 'the theme of love' and 'romantic experiences' do not convey the real nature of the tortuous and ambiguous relations between men and women in Conrad's plots and would therefore be of little use in the present study.

Bernard Meyer, who has used psychoanalysis to interpret the way in which Conrad portrays mutual relations between men and women,<sup>9</sup> claims that the evident difficulties which the writer experienced in portraying the nature of relations between the sexes were caused by complexes which had arisen as a result of traumas and bitterness experienced in his youth and that the unconvincing nature of his literary portrayals of women was basically due to his ignorance and fear of them. Leaving this interpretation to one side (for the moment), I would like to examine how Conrad's experiences as a child and young man formed his outlook on life, for it was this that had a bearing on the way in which he later portrayed relations between men and women in his fiction. To what extent was this a function of his outlook? Was his portrayal of men and women a kind of tribute to his own difficult experiences, which had stripped him of his illusions? Remarks made by Conrad himself in a *Personal Record* would seem to lend some justification to these questions:

[...] I know that a novelist lives in his work. He stands there, the only reality in an invented world, among imaginary things, happenings and people. Writing about them, he is only writing about himself.<sup>10</sup>

This observation is reiterated later on in the book:

A writer of imaginative prose (even more than any other sort of artist) stands confessed in his works. His conscience, his deeper sense of things, lawful and unlawful, gives him his attitude before the world. Indeed, everyone who puts pen to paper for the reading of strangers [...] can speak of nothing else.<sup>11</sup>

It goes without saying that what Conrad has in mind is not the transposition of biographical events into literature, but rather a certain personal stamp that can be sensed throughout the work.

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<sup>7</sup> S. Jones. *Conrad and Women*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> C. Watts. *A Preface to Conrad*. London: Longman, 1982.

<sup>9</sup> B. Meyer. *Joseph Conrad. A Psychoanalytic Biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.

<sup>10</sup> J. Conrad. *A Personal Record*. Ed. Z. Najder and J.H Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

## 1. THE CONRADIAN VIEW OF THE WORLD

Conrad's fondness for paradox and the joining of opposites – which is to be found in many of his sayings and aphorisms – not only enlivens his style, but is also a reflection of the anxiety and existential fear that dwelt within him. The realization that the world is unfathomable and is not ruled by any ethical or logical principle – that even the noblest of intentions can lead to opposite results – makes one feel helpless. Where can we turn for support if we cannot even be sure of our own actions? In the words of Conrad himself:

Life knows us not and we do not know life – we don't know even our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore; thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced, die; and the memory of yesterday is as shadowy as the hope of tomorrow [...].<sup>12</sup>

We are amazed to see that everyday reality does not bear out the moral principles which we have been brought up to observe, while the course of events and the behaviour of others often goes flatly against them: confronted with life's upheavals, they simply evaporate and become an illusion, leaving us with an ever more painful awareness of the tragic gulf that exists between the world and the values which we profess. By scrupulously carrying out the tasks which have been entrusted to us we can stave off despair, but can this give permanent meaning to our lives? As Conrad wrote to Marguerite Poradowska in 1892:

At the age of twenty, one still thinks that one is important. However, the truth is that one only becomes useful when one realizes the full extent of the unimportance of the individual in the general scheme of the universe. It is only when one fully understands that one has no intrinsic worth of one's own and that one's worth is no more and no less than that of the work which one does to an honest end and by honest means – and strictly within the bounds of one's duties towards Society – that one becomes the master of one's conscience and has the right to be called a human being.<sup>13</sup>

However, human beings are weak and – spurred on by unpredictable urges which lead them astray – are prone to behave badly. Conrad's ethic – described by Zdzisław Najder (and before him by Maria Dąbrowska) as being “heroic and irrational” – is

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Conrad to R.B. Cunninghame Graham [In:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Ed. F.R. Karl and L. Davies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, Vol. 2: 1898-1902, p.17.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska, September 4<sup>th</sup> 1892 [In:] *Lettres de Joseph Conrad à Marguerite Poradowska*. Ed. R. Rapin. Genève: Librairie Droz, 1966, pp. 102-103: “On se croit toujours important à 20 ans. Le fait est cependant que l'on ne devient utile que quand on réalise toute l'étendue de l'insignifiance de l'individu dans l'arrangement de l'univers. Quand on a bien compris que par soi-même on n'est rien et que l'homme ne vaut ni plus ni moins que le travail qu'il accomplit avec honnêteté de but et des moyens et dans les strictes limites de son devoir envers la société ce n'est qu'alors que l'on est maître de sa conscience et on a le droit de se dire un homme”.

autonomous<sup>14</sup> and free of any dependence on a higher authority of any kind, be it religious or political. Remaining within the human domain, it originates as a defence against nihilism. The actions of Conrad's main characters are dictated by a sense of the tragedy and absurdity of human existence and are a desperate effort to carry on living in spite of its fundamentally tragic nature. In this field of action, which is limited and beset with traps, it is relations between men and women that constitute the main structure for building suspense. It is only thanks to their desperate attachment to "a few simple truths" – desperate because the reality that surrounds them continually calls these truths into question – that Conrad's main characters are able to fend off moral relativism. Conrad might well have come to understand this even as a child, when he was not spared traumatic experiences. His turbulent youth merely confirmed his convictions and it was these early years of his life that were 'responsible' for his later inclination to pessimism and melancholy as well as his susceptibility to attacks of depression – all of which must have had a bearing on the way he viewed relations between men and women.

## 2. CONRAD'S CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES AND THE EFFECT THEY HAD ON HIS HEALTH

Van der Kolk describes trauma as a crushing experience that prevents people from processing and integrating their memories of it into conscious mental frameworks.<sup>15</sup> According to Susan Finkelstein, Conrad repressed the memories of his feelings of loss, abandonment and even betrayal following the premature deaths of his parents, only to later make them the themes of his fiction (under various guises). He experienced the feeling of 'abandonment' and / or the lack of close emotional ties with his father when he was barely four years old, for it was then that Apollo moved to Warsaw, leaving his family in Żytomierz. The boy only saw his father – briefly – some six months later. As we know, in Warsaw Apollo Korzeniowski was involved in underground political activities connected with preparations for what turned out to be the January Uprising of 1863. It was in his house at 45, Nowy Świat Street that meetings of representatives of the Reds – one of the main insurrectionary factions – were held. Years later, Conrad recorded his memories of the family's Warsaw home:

[...] from a volume of posthumous Memoirs dealing with those bitter years I learned the fact that the first inception of the secret National Committee, intended primarily to organise moral resistance to the augmented pressure of Russianism, arose on my father's initiative and that its first meetings were held in our Warsaw house, of which all I remember distinctly is one room, white and crimson, probably the drawing-room. In one of its walls there was the loftiest of all archways. Where it led to remains a mystery; but to this day I cannot get rid of the belief that

<sup>14</sup> Z. Najder. "O filozofii Conrada" [In:] *Idem. Nad Conradem*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1965, p. 196.

<sup>15</sup> S. Finkelstein. "Hope and Betrayal: a Psychoanalytic Reading of Amy Foster". *Conradiana* 2000, Vol. 32, № 1, p. 22.

all this was of enormous proportions and that the people appearing and disappearing in that immense space were beyond the usual stature of mankind as I got to know it in later life.<sup>16</sup>

There followed yet another long separation, as Conrad's father was arrested and held for seven months in the Warsaw Citadel. In their letters to Apollo, Conrad's mother and grandmother had nothing but praise for him. The inscription on the back of a photograph of the boy taken in 1863 gives us an idea of the way in which he was being brought up:

To my dear Granny, who helped me take cakes to prison for my poor Daddy.  
Your little grandson – Pole, Catholic and nobleman – Konrad.

Pole, Catholic and nobleman – these three words give an exact description of Conrad's national, religious and social status as a child. In later life, his national status as a Pole wavered a little, though only slightly, whereas his religious status eventually became neutral. His status as a member of the Polish nobility (*szlachta*) continued to hold him in good stead, serving as a bedrock of distinctive manners, attitudes and views.

As a very young boy, he could hardly have understood much of what was going on around him and it is impossible to guess what these experiences could have meant to such a lonely and sensitive child. Conrad's biographers only relate what happened from the point of view of his father, who was arrested and exiled before the uprising began and who bore his fate with dignity:

[...] we do not regard exile so much as a punishment as a new way to serve our country.  
[...] Our serene faces, proud bearing and defiant eyes are a cause of great wonder here.<sup>17</sup>

However, there is no written record that could give us an inkling of the way in which the little boy saw all these events. He was torn away from his closest surroundings and deprived of the company of his contemporaries. More than once during the long journey to the north of Russia he must have witnessed the brutal behaviour meted out to his parents by the guards who escorted them to their place of exile. It is easy to imagine the fear and anxiety which incidents such as these would have instilled in a child of tender years. Susan Finkelstein has no doubt that Apollo's political activities – which led to his arrest during a police raid and his subsequent conviction and exile – set off a series of traumatic experiences which, though varying in intensity, must have left a deep scar on his little son's psyche. She also draws attention to the boy's emotional isolation during the time he spent in exile. The family's home became a meeting place for other political exiles. His father – who soon became their unofficial leader – was preoccupied with everyday matters, while his mother had serious health problems. According to the same scholar, Conrad's parents

<sup>16</sup> J. Conrad, *A Personal Record*, ed. cit., pp. 7-8.

<sup>17</sup> Apollo Korzeniowski to G. and J. Zagórski, 27<sup>th</sup> June 1862 [In:] *Conrad under familial eyes*, Ed. Z. Najder, texts translated by H. Carroll-Najder, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 68-69.

unwittingly contributed to his sense of isolation and did not seem to have any understanding of the way in which he perceived the alien reality of his new surroundings:

Strain traumata were also numerous in Conrad's life [...] the emotional isolation brought about by parents who surely loved him but who were too self-absorbed and emotionally limited to have any understanding of how he construed the terrible events taking place around him.<sup>18</sup>

The boy remained in the company of adults and probably had no opportunity to play with other children. Did his parents wonder how he felt and how his young mind was being formed? In a letter to a friend, Apollo writes:

My poor wife, who these last two years has been destroyed by despair and by the repeated blows that fall on members of our families, for the last four months terribly – gravely ill [...] For several months I have been everything in the house – master and servant. [...] Konradek is of course neglected [...] <sup>19</sup>

Apollo was devastated by the news of the military defeats suffered by his compatriots and by the failure of the uprising. His dejection, which never left him, was later compounded by his wife's premature death. This atmosphere of almost funereal gloom continued to overshadow Conrad's childhood right up until his father's death. Apollo admits as much in another letter to his friend Kazimierz Kaszewski:

Poor child: he does not know what a contemporary playmate is; he looks at the decrepitude of my sadness and who knows if that sight does not make his young heart wrinkled or his awakening soul grizzled.<sup>20</sup>

These words would seem to have been an apt prediction of certain traits which Conrad later displayed in adult life: a certain mistrustfulness and reserve towards other people, coupled with a sense of his own worth.

Apollo devoted a great deal of time and energy to his work for the national cause without realizing that he was doing so at the cost of his sensitive and lonely child. Although he undertook the task of bringing up and educating Konradek at home, his expectations were not high:

I teach him all I know myself – alas, it is not much; I guard him against the influence of the local atmosphere and the little mite is growing up as though in a cloister.<sup>21</sup>

Added to the ordeal of exile was the boy's feeling of hurt and injustice. This life in a faraway and alien town where he had no contemporaries – coupled with feelings

<sup>18</sup> S. Finkelstein. "Hope and Betrayal: a Psychoanalytic Reading of *Amy Foster*". *Conradiana* 2000, Vol. 32, № 1, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> Apollo Korzeniowski to Kazimierz Kaszewski, February 26<sup>th</sup> 1865 [In:] *Conrad under familial eyes*. Ed. Z. Najder, texts translated by H. Carroll-Najder. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 91.

<sup>20</sup> Apollo Korzeniowski to Kazimierz Kaszewski, September 18<sup>th</sup> 1865 [In:] *Conrad under familial eyes*, ed. cit., p. 98.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



of loss and loneliness – eventually took its toll on the boy's health. On the last day of December in 1866 Apollo writes:

I am alone. My poor little Konradek has been ill for five months and is now with his granny, having treatment in Kiev.<sup>22</sup>

On the advice of the doctors in Kiev, the boy was sent to stay at his uncle's estate in the countryside. Later he was sent to Żytomierz for further treatment. According to the testimony of family members and later friends – Tadeusz Bobrowski, Konstanty Buszczyński and Tekla (z Syroczyńskich) Wojakowska – it would seem that during this period Conrad suffered from “nervous attacks” and severe headaches. Indeed, these afflictions continued to plague him later on, during the ‘Cracow’ period of 1869-1873. Conrad's cousin Tekla Wojakowska recalled that in 1873, during his second stay in Lwów, he suffered from:

[...] nervous attacks and very severe headaches caused by migraine. The doctors declared that a stay at the seaside might help him recover.<sup>23</sup>

When he was in his early teens, Conrad's sufferings were compounded by his father's premature death in the May of 1869. His health problems were a matter of concern to his family and a frequent subject of correspondence. As we read in a letter from his grandmother to Kazimierz Kaszewski:

The boy's ignorance of the German and Latin languages prevent him from attending the second class; we hope he will go into the fourth class next year [...] providing God gives him health – to which end I shall devote myself in his free time.<sup>24</sup>

After his father's death, Conrad was taken by his grandmother for treatment at a spa in Bavaria. He also spent two of his holidays at the Polish spa of Krynica.

### 3. MELANCHOLY AND DEPRESSION

Much has been written about the physical health problems which Conrad had in his youth. However, it would seem that his childhood experiences also left their mark on his psyche. According to Susan Finkelstein, the trauma of losing his mother at the age of seven and his father at the age of twelve not only weakened Conrad's physical health, but also deprived him of faith in goodness, a feeling of security and a sense of

<sup>22</sup> Apollo Korzeniowski to Kazimierz Kaszewski, December 31<sup>st</sup> 1866 [In:] *Polskie zaplecze Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego. Dokumenty rodzinne, listy, wspomnienia*. Ed. Z. Najder and J. Skolik. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Gaudium, 2006, vol. I, p. 181.

<sup>23</sup> St. Czosnowski, “Conradiana” [In:] *Wspomnienia i studia o Conradzie*. Ed. B. Kocówna. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1963, p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Teofila Bobrowska to Kazimierz Kaszewski, June 12<sup>th</sup> 1869 [In:] *Conrad under familial eyes*, ed. cit., p. 131.



the predictability of the world.<sup>25</sup> Although pessimism did not dominate Conrad's psyche, it had become one of its permanent facets. His inclination to melancholy, mood swings and depression never left him in later years and at times would seem to have affected his writing. In a letter which he sent to Marguerite Poradowska in the July of 1894 he confesses:

My nervous disorder tortures me, makes me wretched, and paralyses action, thoughts, everything!

I ask myself why I exist.<sup>26</sup>

In a letter written in the following year we read:

My nature is to be miserable, morally beggared and bankrupt of courage. I should be leaving for Newfoundland on business but I hardly feel well enough, and the trip is postponed. [...] How black, black, black everything is! This is one of my bad days.<sup>27</sup>

Two months later Conrad writes:

I am not well. To set myself up again, I am quitting my bed and going to Champel for hydrotherapy. This explains to you my long silence. You know that when I am not well I have attacks of melancholy which paralyse my thought and will.<sup>28</sup>

Susan Finkelstein is of the opinion that Conrad tried to overcome the negative emotional legacy of his youth by creating a distance between it and himself, working out the trauma and coming to terms with it, thus accepting it and even putting it to good use. To be sure, literature offers abundant opportunities to rid oneself of fears and anxieties acquired in childhood by naming them and – through the process of literary transformation – by mitigating their gloomy influence. This subject has been discussed at length by Jeffrey Berman in his book *Fiction as a Rescue*. However, as Conrad's correspondence shows, the compensatory role of literature has its limits. The demands of creative work were often beyond the author's strength and he would bemoan his inability to find new ideas in order to make progress in his work. His greatest crisis came in 1910, towards the end of January. As Zdzisław Najder observes, several circumstances contributed to this breakdown: the sudden release of tension which followed the completion of *Under Western Eyes*, the oppressive dreariness of his living conditions in Aldington and his difficult financial situation. The last straw was an extremely unpleasant meeting with his publisher Pinker, which ended in a row and from which he returned home a broken man. Shortly afterwards his health spiralled out of control. Gout took hold of his throat, tongue and head. Fever was ac-

<sup>25</sup> S. Finkelstein. "Hope and Betrayal: a Psychoanalytic Reading of *Amy Foster*". *Conradiana*, ed. cit., p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1894 [In:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Ed. Fr.R. Karl and L. Davies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, Vol. 1: 1861-1897, p. 163.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1895 [In:] *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1895 [In:] *Ibid.*, pp. 210-211.

accompanied by momentary blackouts and Conrad was laid low for three months until the beginning of May.

Difficult and distressing experiences have at times actually fuelled the creativity of all manner of artists, as is shown by the example of Edward Munch, who was so traumatized by the premature deaths of his mother, sister and father that illness and death became his constant companions. Years later, however, he declared:

My fear of life is necessary to me, as is my illness. Without anxiety and illness, I am a ship without a rudder. My art is grounded in reflections over being different from others. My sufferings are part of myself and my art. They are indistinguishable from me and their destruction would destroy my art. I want to keep those sufferings.<sup>29</sup>

The question we must ask is whether Conrad's experiences could have similarly fuelled his creativity.

#### 4. A CHILDHOOD IN THE COMPANY OF WOMEN

A child's mother is the first woman whose presence he or she experiences. The poor health of Conrad's mother – who had been a sickly girl before she married and had often been to Żytomierz / Zhitomir to take the waters – might well have restricted the extent of her active contact with her little son. The atmosphere of Conrad's six-month stay in Żytomierz in the company of his mother, who shared her husband's patriotic zeal, was – as Ewelina Korzeniowska herself wrote in a letter to Apollo – of a particular kind:

Mourning is generally observed to the extent that coloured dresses can be seen only occasionally. Konradek still wears our three favourite colours; but he has a mourning frock which I always make him put on for church.<sup>30</sup>

This was a time when the wearing of mourning clothes had become a way of protesting against the brutal suppression of Polish patriotic demonstrations in the Russian partition. Religious services were held as a matter of course to commemorate the dead victims of tsarist oppression. This was in accordance with the revival of Polish messianism, which saw the sacrifices made by the nation as the price that had to be paid for the nation's future liberation. As Zdzisław Najder remarks:

Konrad was not yet four when this sometimes macabre intertwining of patriotism and cemetery became the rule – and it persisted for many years, as symbolic mourning became real mourning soon after the outbreak of the 1863 Insurrection [...]<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> U. Bischoff. *Edvard Munch 1863-1944*. Köln: Taschen, 2005, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Ewelina Korzeniowska to Apollo Korzeniowski, OS June 19<sup>th</sup> 1861 [In:] *Conrad under familial eyes*, ed. cit., p. 49.

<sup>31</sup> Z. Najder. *Joseph Conrad. A Life*. Transl. H. Najder. New York: Camden House, 2007, p. 16.

As we know, the family were reunited again six months later, when Ewelina and Konradek moved to Warsaw. The journey and the prospect of seeing his father again must have delighted the boy. As Ewelina wrote to Apollo:

Konradek mentions you every day, asking, 'When shall we go to Daddy?'<sup>32</sup>

His joy was short-lived, however, as a few weeks later his father was incarcerated in the Warsaw Citadel and he found himself once again alone with his mother.

Ewelina was no ordinary woman of her time, as she was well educated, had a sense of her own worth and had ambitions that went beyond the traditional roles of mother and wife – the proof of which was her involvement in politics. Comparing her with her younger sister Teofila, her brother Tadeusz Bobrowski – who later became Conrad's guardian and mentor – assessed Ewelina as follows:

My elder sister possessed beauty and wordly deportment, and her education was above that of our contemporary women. She had a lively imagination and a warm heart. [...] As she was rather weak in health, the conflict between her love for her future husband and the will of her father, whose memory and opinion she cherished, naturally upset her inner balance; dissatisfied with herself, she could not give others what she lacked herself. In later years, when she was united with the man she loved, her unusual qualities of intelligence, feeling, mind and heart blossomed out to the full.<sup>33</sup>

What Bobrowski is trying to convey is that his father's continual refusal to agree to Ewelina's marriage to Apollo had a bad effect on her mental state and caused her to be emotionally unstable, being torn between her love for her father and her love for Apollo and living in a state of uncertainty. The justification which Bobrowski provides for his own agreement to his sister's marriage to Apollo – given after their father's death – is very revealing. Apart from his genuine fears for his sister's health, there was also the fear that – given the strength of her character – Ewelina would decide to accept the stigma of being an old maid rather than marry someone else:

Realizing that both her health and future were threatened, my mother and I believed that we should encourage rather than discourage her in taking a firm decision, as we knew that if she were not united with the man of her choice, she would remain single and not marry for the sake of getting married.<sup>34</sup>

From the letters which Apollo wrote during the couple's time in exile we can deduce that Ewelina's ties with her son were becoming progressively weaker as her physical and mental condition worsened. Ravaged by tuberculosis, she was also severely depressed by the failure of the 1863 Uprising against Russia and by the fact that members of both her own family and that of her husband had been killed. The general gloom could not have failed to affect her son's mental and emotional development. As Conrad recalled years later:

<sup>32</sup> Ewelina Korzeniowska to Apollo Korzeniowski, OS May 18<sup>th</sup> 1861 [In:] *Conrad under familial eyes*, ed. cit., p. 44.

<sup>33</sup> *Conrad under familial eyes*, ed. cit., p. 25 (Bobrowski's 'Memoirs' II, 17-19).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30 (Bobrowski's 'Memoirs' II, 72).

Amongst them I remember my mother, a more familiar figure than the others, dressed in the black of the national mourning worn in defiance of ferocious police regulations. I have also preserved from that particular time the awe of her mysterious gravity which, indeed, was by no means smileless. For I remember her smiles too. Perhaps for me she could always find a smile. She was young then, certainly not thirty yet. She died four years later in exile.<sup>35</sup>

If Conrad had indeed needed more tenderness and devotion, then he certainly could have got these from his grandmother Teofila Bobrowska, who took care of him when his health problems began in Russia. He was first sent to stay with her in Nowochwastów (in central Ukraine) in the May of 1866. Shortly after Apollo's death in 1869 she came to Cracow to look after Conrad and stayed with him until the January of 1870. She came again in December, this time staying with her grandson for almost three years. As Conrad's biographers have paid scant attention to Conrad's grandmother, it is worth recalling Tadeusz Bobrowski's portrayal of her:

She knew how to extend the warmth of her affection, her advice and help, not only to those near her, but even to utter strangers who were attracted by her tolerance and in whom she inspired confidence. She was able to gain the love and respect of all those who knew her well, and this in spite of her strongly held personal views.<sup>36</sup>

Conrad may well have inherited his independence of mind and his readiness to 'stick to his guns' from his grandmother. He spent the early years of his childhood in the company of women. Their influence on his psyche cannot be open to doubt, as it was they who cared for him and who taught him how to view the world. In later years, this influence could be detected in – among other things – Conrad's charming manner, which was noted by his friends. As Edward Garnett recalled:

My memory is of seeing a dark-haired man, short but extremely graceful in his nervous gestures, with brilliant eyes, now narrowed and penetrating, now soft and warm, with a manner alert yet caressing, whose speech was ingratiating, guarded, and brusque turn by turn. I had never seen before a man so masculinely keen yet so femininely sensitive.<sup>37</sup>

#### 4. THE MARSEILLES PERIOD

The year 1874, when the seventeen-year-old Conrad left Poland for Marseilles is, of course, a great turning point in his life. Even Conrad himself was unable to give a rational explanation for his decision to go to sea – a decision which greatly surprised his friends and evoked protests from members of his family. In *Some Reminiscences* he writes at length about the circumstances in which it was made, though he himself marvels at his erstwhile stubbornness. However, given what he had

<sup>35</sup> J. Conrad. *A Personal Record*, ed. cit., p. 12 (Author's Note).

<sup>36</sup> *Conrad under familial eyes*, ed. cit., p. 5 (Bobrowski's 'Memoirs' I, 57).

<sup>37</sup> Z. Najder. *Joseph Conrad. A Life*, ed. cit., p. 197.

been through, it seems quite obvious that he just wanted to 'get away from it all' and make a break with the past.

He was now on his own. Armed with a letter of recommendation from Wiktor Chodźko, he got in touch with Jean-Baptiste Solary, who in turn introduced him to the shipowner Jean-Baptiste Déléstan. It was the latter who – in the opinion of Conrad scholars – introduced the future writer to the bourgeois world of Marseilles. At the same time, however, Conrad got to know the harbour pilots of Marseilles who taught him the basic skills of seamanship. For Conrad, these two worlds became intertwined, though he did not make any lasting friendships. Only about half of the time that could be called Conrad's 'Marseilles period' was actually spent on land – and only about half of that was of a continuous nature. The rest of the lad's time was spent at sea. Be that as it may, thanks to his generous allowance from uncle Tadeusz (two thousand francs per annum), he could sample the delights of Marseilles, which – apart from being one of the biggest ports in the world – was then a flourishing cultural centre with a population of 330 000.<sup>38</sup> It was probably then that Conrad heard truly great opera performances for the first time – music that he would fondly recall in his correspondence and even in his novels.

Coming after the gloom and rigours of his life in partitioned Poland, the free and easy atmosphere of such an exciting city as Marseilles could and did turn the young man's head, though – for lack of hard evidence – we can only guess at what happened on the basis of enigmatic allusions which Conrad made in his later years. Did Conrad make the acquaintance of a mysterious and influential lady of Marseilles to whom he later gave the name Rita in *The Arrow of Gold*? And did he fall in love with her? Unfortunately, we shall never know, though Jocelyn Baines is of the opinion that the passionate love affair described in *The Arrow of Gold* must have had some basis in real life – albeit perhaps on a much more modest scale – for otherwise Conrad would have to be ranked as a mere fantasizer:

[...] to dismiss the whole Rita story as fabrication would amount to charging Conrad with mythomania.<sup>39</sup>

During his time in Marseilles, Conrad was a spendthrift. From his uncle's letters, we know that by the middle of 1876 he had already exceeded his annual allowance and was in dire financial straits. Driven to despair by the failure of his various inept attempts to remedy the situation, he would seem to have made a botched attempt at suicide. This version of events, which is given by Tadeusz Bobrowski in a letter to Konstanty Buszczyński, is accepted by Zdzisław Najder and Gérard Jean-Aubry. However, according to Aniela Zagórska and his son John, Conrad spoke only of a duel. Whatever the truth of the matter, we can say that the root causes of these dramatic events – i.e. a suicide attempt and / or a duel with a rival – were Conrad's falling into debt and his passionate and reckless love for some beautiful woman. This

<sup>38</sup> F. Ziejka. "Conrad's Marseilles" [In:] *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2012, vol. VII, pp. 53-57.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted by Zdzisław Najder: Z. Najder. *Joseph Conrad. A Life*, ed. cit., p. 61.

would indicate that he was a very emotional and impulsive person who was liable to go to extremes. As his uncle remarked in a letter to a friend:

[...] he is not a bad boy, only one who is extremely sensitive, conceited, reserved, and in addition excitable. In short I found in him all the defects of the Nałęcz family. [...] His manners are very good, as if he had never left drawing-rooms [...] certainly the temperament of the Nałęcz family is predominant in him – and I may be mistaken but I think that unfortunately he has taken after his paternal uncle rather than after his father. In his face he rather resembles his mother and is quite a handsome boy; in his build he is more like his father and is quite robust. In his ideas and discussions he is ardent and original.<sup>40</sup>

This assessment is confirmed by Edward Garnett's account of Conrad's meeting with the publisher Unwin:

The conversation between our host and Conrad for some time was halting and jerky ... Conrad, extremely polite, grew nervously brusque in his responses, and kept shifting his feet one over the other, so that I became fascinated in watching the flash of his pointed patent leather shoes. The climax came unexpectedly when in answer to Mr Unwin's casual but significant reference to "your next book", Conrad threw himself back on the broad leather lounge and in a tone that put a clear cold space between himself and his hearers, said: "I don't expect to write again. It is likely that I shall soon be going to sea."<sup>41</sup>

## 5. LOST ILLUSIONS

No hard evidence has survived of Conrad's schoolboy infatuations (in Lwów and Cracow) with girls from families who were friends of the Korzeniowskis: Tekla Syroczyńska, Karolina Taube or Ofelia Buszczyńska.

Conrad's reputed infatuation with the mysterious lady in Marseilles may well have coloured his relations with women later on in life. What is certain is that these relations mostly afforded him bitterness and disappointment. Some (as in the case of Marguerite Poradowska) were ambiguous, some (as in the case of Ida Knight or Eugenia Renouf) were misplaced, while others (as in the case of Émilie Briquel) were obviously impossible.

Conrad made the acquaintance of Marguerite Poradowska while he was living abroad. Her husband Alexander Poradowski was related to the Korzeniowskis through Conrad's great-grandmother Ewa (z Poradowskich) Pilchowska. Marguerite (whose maiden name was Gachet) was a Belgian who – having a flair for literature – published stories and novels, of which Conrad was an avid reader. She became Conrad's friend and confidante, being one of the first to know about his creative crises, his health problems and his bouts of depression. It would seem that there was more to their relationship than just affection and attachment, as one day Conrad received a stiff admonition from his uncle and guardian:

<sup>40</sup> *Idem. Joseph Conrad. A Life, ed. cit.*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197-199.

[...] it seems to me that you both fail to see that you are only flirting with each other since the death of poor Oleś [Alex] – as an old sparrow friendly to you both I advise you to give up this game, which will end in nothing sensible. A worn-out female, and if she is to remarry, it will be with Buls who would give her a position and love – of which he has given proof. It would be a stone round your neck for you – and for her as well. If you are wise you will leave this amusement alone and part simply as friends: if not, however, you have been warned! – and you will not be able to say later on that you were not warned!<sup>42</sup>

Zdzisław Najder – who is of the opinion that Conrad actually contemplated marriage to Marguerite when she became a widow in 1890 – observes that the chances of his proposal being accepted were slight, as – apart from the fact that Marguerite was much older than him – his professional and financial status was then still very insecure.

It was above all in their correspondence that Conrad and “Aunt Marguerite” were at their closest. Conrad paid her several visits in Brussels, but stayed only for one or two days on each occasion. He found it easier to express his tenderness and attachment in his letters than to begin a formal courtship. Realizing, no doubt, that he had little hope of success, he feared the prospect of being a rejected suitor.

Conrad's infatuation with Émilie Briquel began in the May of 1895, when they met at Champel in Switzerland. Émilie, who came from a wealthy French family, was staying at a guest-house with her mother. The days she spent with Conrad were taken up with games of croquet, sailing excursions on the lake, trips into town and conversations about literature:

I met Mr Conrad in the tram on [Boulevard de] la Cluse, then again in the library and we returned together. That's hardly in accordance with etiquette and convention! In the evening we had a game of billiards and afterwards I played the violin.<sup>43</sup>

As *Almayer's Folly* had just come out, Conrad presented a copy to his new friend, complete with the following handwritten dedication:

To Miss Emily Briquel – whose charming musical gift and ever-bright presence has cheered for him the dull life of Champel, this book is presented by her most humble, grateful and obedient servant – the Author.<sup>44</sup>

On his departure for Brussels – which he had postponed – Conrad presented Émilie with the score of *Carmen*. Émilie's correspondence and the entries in her diary show that Conrad's personality had made a great impression on her:

This year in Champel, I met Mr Conrad, I speak about him often and at length, I write to him, and I think that I am very fond of him! Perhaps, but I am fond of him as a friend, as an agreeable acquaintance, which cannot be compared to love! I dream of a quiet little nest, of a secluded happiness for two, of the supreme happiness of married love.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Tadeusz Bobrowski to Konrad Korzeniowski, OS 18<sup>th</sup> July 1891 [In:] *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.



Conrad kept up their correspondence, perhaps in the hope that his fortunes might change, thus allowing him to ask for the hand of this member of an old bourgeois family from Lorraine. He was a handsome and interesting man with great personal charm and impeccable manners. Women probably found him attractive and he certainly knew how to interest them. At the same time, however, none of his relationships with women made any significant progress. There were always obstacles. Some of these, such as his insecure professional and financial status, were simply external circumstances. Others, however, may have had their source within Conrad himself – in his psyche. His attitude towards women was ambivalent and indecisive. On the one hand he sought their company, while on the other he was afraid of them. It was as if something was pulling him back and keeping him from fully committing himself.

Instead of ‘fighting’ for women, Conrad gave up at the first sign of difficulties. In 1895 he took an interest in Ida Knight – the seventeen-year-old daughter of the Commissioner of Port Darwin – whom he met at the house of the mother of Captain Burroughs. However, when he learnt that the youngest sister of his friend’s mother had fallen in love with him and was making jealous scenes, he immediately backed off.

At the age of thirty-eight, his experience of relationships with women had been limited to short-lived acquaintances which brought him neither fulfilment nor emotional satisfaction. Although most of them ended suddenly – leaving him feeling disappointed, hurt and bitter – they left him with no illusions. He needed the support of someone he could trust. In a letter to Edward Garnett dated 7<sup>th</sup> June 1895 he wrote:

True – there is love. That is always new – or rather startling being generally unexpected and violent – and fleeting. Still one must have some object to hang his affection upon – and I haven’t.<sup>46</sup>

Conrad had no illusions about true love, which he understood as being “unexpected”, “violent” and “fleeting”, this having been his experience of it.

Towards the end of 1894 he made the acquaintance of Jessie George – a young girl from a lower middle-class family who was working as a typist in a London office. She was no beauty and their relationship did not appear to be particularly romantic, as Jessie herself recalled years later:

My first meetings with Joseph Conrad, sandwiched as they were between his last two voyages as Chief Officer of the sailing-ship *Torrens*, were most casual and, I am certain, could have held little significance for him beyond the recollection of a pleasant half-hour or so.<sup>47</sup>

Jessie’s assessment was not far wrong, as their next meeting took place almost a year later. In the meantime, Conrad kept in touch with Marguerite Poradowska and ‘flirted’ with Émilie Briquel in Switzerland. He eventually renewed his acquaintance with Jessie by inviting her and her mother to have dinner with him at the Overtons restaurant near Victoria station. More meetings followed, until one day Conrad de-

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Conrad to Edward Garnett, June 7<sup>th</sup> 1895 [In:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. cit., Vol. 1: 1861-1897, p. 224.

<sup>47</sup> J. Conrad. *Joseph Conrad and his Circle*. London: Jarrolds Publishers, 1935, p. 9.

cided to take her to the National Gallery. Meeting him at Victoria, Jessie found his behaviour more eccentric than usual:

First of all, he found fault with my hat, my dress and with my general appearance. Why hadn't I more colour? I was beginning to feel rather sorry I had accepted his invitation that morning. As if he could read my thoughts he gave a short laugh, squeezed my arm and drew me to the edge of the kerb, then beckoning a passing hansom he hurried me into it and got in after me. I glanced at his face when we were seated and was startled by the expression of gloomy determination on it.<sup>48</sup>

All became clear when – in one of the rooms of the National Gallery – Conrad proposed to her. The proposal was not a declaration of his love for Jessie, but rather a practical proposition that was suggested by the circumstances:

Look here, my dear, we had better get married and out this. Look at the weather. We will get married at once and get over to France. How soon can you be ready? In a week – a fortnight?<sup>49</sup>

The way in which Conrad later 'asked' Jessie's mother for her daughter's hand in marriage went against all universally accepted norms of behaviour and – by giving the worst possible motives for wanting to marry the girl – undermined his own credibility:

Suddenly, with his usual disregard of any form of preliminary introduction, Joseph Conrad began to speak, the words tumbling out one after the other rapidly. My mother, surprised and greatly disconcerted, turned to look reproachfully at me. [...] She smiled a little ruefully when he began to explain that one of his chief reasons for haste was that he hadn't very long to live and, further, that there would be no family. He ended up with a demand for a very short engagement and declared his intention of taking me abroad at once – indefinitely.<sup>50</sup>

In the event, Jessie's mother acquiesced. Breaking the news to his cousin Karol Zagórski, Conrad wrote:

I announce solemnly (as the occasion demands) to dear Aunt Gabrynia and to you both that I am getting married. No one can be more surprised at it than myself. However, I am not frightened at all, for as you know, I am accustomed to an adventurous life and to facing terrible dangers. Moreover, I have to avow that my betrothed does not give the impression of being at all dangerous. Jessie is her name; George her surname. She is a small, not at all striking-looking person (to tell the truth alas – rather plain!) who nevertheless is very dear to me.<sup>51</sup>

Although the nonchalant tone of Conrad's announcement could have given the impression that he felt relieved after coming to his decision, we must bear in mind that it might have been intended to conceal his apprehension and anxiety. He was now thirty-nine and not in the best of health. His craft as a mariner was the only way in which he could hope to achieve some measure of financial stability. He was also

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Joseph Conrad to Karol Zagórski, March 10<sup>th</sup> 1896 [In:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. ed. cit., Vol. 1: 1861-1897, p. 265.

a foreigner. Although he was of noble birth, his family had lost much of its former wealth and he had to work for a living. He now realized that he could not marry a woman of his own social class and so had to 'lower his sights':

When I met her a year and a half ago she was earning her living in the City as a "Typewriter" in an American business office of the "Caligraph" company.<sup>52</sup>

Was Conrad's decision to marry Jessie hastened by the fact that Émilie Briquel's mother had officially informed him of her daughter's engagement? In his courteous reply, he informed his Belgian friends of his own matrimonial plans.

After meeting Jessie, Conrad's devoted friend Edward Garnett advised him not to marry her, arguing that:

Conrad's ultra-nervous organization appeared to make matrimony extremely hazardous.<sup>53</sup>

Eventually – in the preface to a volume of Conrad's letters which he published after the author's death – Garnett acknowledged that Jessie had her good points:

[...] Jessie Conrad's temperament was perfect; calming him and taking the daily trials and rubs of life off his shoulders.<sup>54</sup>

However, in a private letter written after the publication of Jessie's second book of reminiscences about Conrad, Garnett's assessment of her was extremely critical:

Jessie should have been a keeper of a fourth-class hotel or of a school for bar-women. I knew that from the first. Conrad having no knowledge of the social shades in English women and wanting a Housekeeper has had to pay, at long last, for his experiment.<sup>55</sup>

The news of Conrad's marriage to Jessie must have been received with consternation by the writer's friends and acquaintances, as is shown by Ford Madox Ford's satirical novel (published under a pseudonym) entitled *The Simple Life Limited*, which contained obvious allusions to Conrad, Jessie and Garnett.<sup>56</sup>

Conrad must certainly have been fully aware that Jessie would never be an intellectual partner for him and that she would hardly be of any help when it came to looking for literary inspiration. It seems that what he expected was that she should run the household, take care of the family and generally let him get on with the business of writing novels. This she did with great devotion – if we are to believe her own account.

There were times, however, when Conrad found the strictures of marriage somewhat irksome. In 1916 he made the acquaintance of the young American journalist Jane Anderson – the wife of an American composer – who for a few weeks was his guest at Capel house. Here she met Józef Retinger, who subsequently left his wife in

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Z. Najder. *Joseph Conrad. A Life*, ed. cit., p. 222.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222-223.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 424.

the hope of marrying her. She was then a war correspondent and – according to Zdzisław Najder – in later years worked for the Nazis.<sup>57</sup> Conrad himself was very much taken by her, as we know from a letter he wrote to Richard H.P. Curle:

We made the acquaintance of a new young woman. She comes from Arizona and (strange to say!) she has a European mind. She is seeking to get herself adopted as our big daughter and is succeeding fairly. To put it shortly she's quite yum-yum.<sup>58</sup>

So well did Jane get on with Conrad that some scholars have wondered whether the two may have begun to flirt with each other, although there is no hard evidence for such a hypothesis. What is certain is that Conrad's fascination with the young American eventually aroused Jessie's displeasure. Their acquaintance came to an end in 1920, when Jane left for the United States in the company of Conrad's friend Retinger.

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It would seem that there was a strong link between Conrad's traumatic experiences as a child, his later unsuccessful relationships with women and the way in which he portrayed relations between the sexes in his fiction. Sue Finkelstein is of the opinion that Conrad repressed his traumatic childhood experiences of loss and abandonment, only to later bring them back into his novels.<sup>59</sup> The words which the narrator uses to describe the nature of the relationship between Amy and Yanko in *Amy Foster* are quite revealing:

She fell in love silently, obstinately – perhaps helplessly. It came slowly, but when it came it worked like a powerful spell; it was love as the Ancients understood it: an irresistible and fateful impulse – a possession!<sup>60</sup>

What brings the two characters together is a feeling of loneliness, rejection and alienation. Yanko is the survivor of a shipwreck – an alien who is treated as such by the other people in the village. Amy has no family or home of her own. Although their relationship is sealed by the natural attraction of the sexes to each other, they soon find that there is much else that separates them besides the enormous cultural differences. The phrase “irresistible and fateful impulse” tears away the illusions that they have about their relationship, exposing it as being nothing more than the result of irresistible sexual attraction. These words convey the essence of relations between men and women in many other of Conrad's works, e.g. *An Outcast of the Islands* (Peter Willems and Ayesha), *Almayer's Folly* (Nina and Dain) and *The Lagoon* (Diamelen and Arsat). The stories of Edith Travers and Tom Lingard, Antonia Avellanos and

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 488.

<sup>58</sup> Joseph Conrad to Richard Curle, August 20<sup>th</sup> 1916 [In:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Ed. F.R. Karl and L. Davies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, Vol. 5: 1912-1916, p. 637.

<sup>59</sup> S. Finkelstein. “Hope and Betrayal: a Psychoanalytic Reading of *Amy Foster*”. *Conradiana*, ed. cit., p. 21.

<sup>60</sup> J. Conrad. *Typhoon (and other stories)*. New York: Doubleday, 1921, p. 110.

Martin Decoud – to say nothing of Linda Viola and Nostromo – are all marked by a sense of inevitability.

The protagonists of *The Rescue* would seem to be aware of the workings of fate and are ultimately able to resist the power of the sexual attraction that destines them for each other. Antonia Avellanos keeps her passion at bay by the expedient of her participation in the task of putting the world to rights while Martin pays a high price for giving in to the “irresistible and fateful impulse”. Linda and Nostromo head towards each other and thus to disaster. The impulse towards love eventually destroys Freya and Allen (in *Freya of the Seven Isles*). Only rarely does a meeting between a man and a woman develop into a fully empathetic relationship which brings serene tranquillity. When it does so – as in the case of Flora de Barral and Captain Anthony in *Chance* – there is a high price to pay beforehand, as the couple must embark on a long and tortuous road paved with adversity and suffering.

The words “irresistible and fateful impulse” not only seem to be particularly applicable to relations between men and women in Conrad’s fiction, but would also seem to constitute a model according to which the author maps out the courses of their lives. The Conradian drama of relations between men and women is played out between two extremes or poles, as it were. In most cases we have an “irresistible and fateful impulse”. At other times the woman is idealized, while the man is left to play the equally unconvincing role of enthralled admirer.

Translated by R. E. Pyplacz

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